

MAṬAṆ-MĀ AS SĀDHANA IN BHAKTI
NOTES ON THE VAISHNAVA POETESS ĀṆṬĀL
OF SRIVILLIPUTTUR

In classical Tamil Literature the two themes *akam* and *puṇam* are predominant. In very simplified presentation they are said to deal with « Love » and « War », the inside and outside of human existence. For *puṇam* a more comprehensive theme can be inferred from the division *Aṇam*, *Poruḷ*, *Inṇam* of the *Tirukkuraḷ* where the last portion, *Inṇam* covers the contents of *akam* in terms of love between man and woman more specifically qualified by the Sanskrit equivalent *kāma*.

Whatever it is the *akam* poetry has acquired a role also for devotional language to express relationship to the Divine, which may generally be named as Bhakti. The meaning and significance of the subject in the literature of India will be hinted at only by reference to two strictly limited areas. We shall give some notes on one particular Bhakta, the Tamil Poetess Āṇṭāl, one of the twelve āḷvār, who lived in the 8th century A.D., from 716 to 731 according to certain astrological data, and we shall take up just one peculiar item, namely the *maṭaṇ-mā* or *maṭal-ūrtal*.

In dealing with this subject we are to a large extent depending on Pandit S. Krishnaveniyammaiyar's book *Villiputtūr Viḷakku*, printed in Madras 1959. Āṇṭāl is the « Light of Villiputtur » the famous temple town in the Ramnad district.

The word *maṭaṇ-mā* has as its first part *maṭal*, which is translated by the Tamil Lexicon as « flat leaf of palm », or « jagged stem of a palmyra leaf » and thus a « Horse of palmyra stems on which a thwarted lover mounts to proclaim his grief and win his love ».

Reference is made to Tolkappiyam, Porulatikaraṁ 51 « *ēṇiya maṭar-riṇam* », the way of mounting the *maṭal*, indicating unreciprocated love, *peruntinai*.

With *mā* added the meaning of riding is brought into special prominence, *mā* being translated as male of horse, pig or elephant. *Maṭal-ūrtal* is the more common Tamil expression for this desperate way of

expressing one's feelings of frustration and disappointment in love affairs. A man should ride through the main streets of the village with a picture of his beloved, drawn by himself on a piece of cloth before him on which his eyes are directed without ever blinking. This concentration makes him indifferent to attacks of animals, excessive heat or rain. The town people may bring his intention to a test by pulling him along and of signs of his manliness decide to let him win his purpose or to kill him.

This is one way of expressing feelings, one among the seven modes which apart from following the traditional division into five *tiṇai* or regions also include *kaikkilai* and *Peruntinai*, the first meaning unreciprocated love and the second love unacceptable to relatives or improper for reasons of age or caste. The third part of *Tirukkuraḷ*, *Ṇṇam/Kāma* accordingly deals with the problem behind *maṭal* in the chapter *Nāṇut-turavuraittal*, « Rejection of modesty ». The first seven of its ten distichs speak of *maṭal* as the only and necessary remedy: « To those who have experienced love's joy and suffer afflicted, there is no help so efficient as the palmyra horse ». « Laying reserve aside, the body and atman (*uyir*) that can endure no more will mount the palmyra horse ».

This is not fit for women to do according to public opinion but even a woman can be brought to desperate actions by her intense love. The vast literature of *akam*, especially so the *Aka Nānūru*, one of the collection *Eṭṭuttokai*, presents sceneries and talks from both sides. There will be room for disappointment and longing as well as for enjoyment. As a means for removing barriers between the two parties *maṭal* is not open to women in its usual form, but women can be brought to using extreme means for achieving their purposes. When a man climbs the palmyra raft he exposes himself to ridicule as *Tirukkuraḷ* 1134 expresses: « The raft of modesty and manliness is swept away by love's rushing tide ». So also for a woman « The loss of maiden modesty », *Tirukkuraḷ* 1251, is the drastic step for her to reach the goal. « I cannot hide this pain (from others), nor can I reveal it without shame to him who caused it », Idem 1162. An act for the unhappy, loving maid equal in effect to *maṭal* is envisaged in *Tirukkuraḷ* 1137-39. The irresistible force of love makes the maid challenge public opinion of modesty and decency. « Even the love of women rends the veil of secrecy and courts publicity, forgetting that they are too virtuous and liberal to be overcome by it ». « The foolish village folk giggle, laugh and mock me and my pallid cheeks as they pass. What do they know, poor ones, of the bitter torments and pangs I feel » In the words of Krishnaveniyammaiyar this, being improper to woman modesty, is a kind of *maṭal*¹. After having presented the implication of *maṭal* *ūrtal* and stated that Tamil books confirm that women do not ride the *maṭal* the author, commenting on some authorities like the *Tirukkuraḷ*, raises the question if that is the whole truth.

1. S. KIRUṢṆAVĒNIYAMMAIYAR, *Villiputtūr Viḷakku*, Madras, 1959, p. 70.

The point of reference is now that the whole subject/theme of *akam* with many of its delicate and intricate details has become applicable to the devotional relationship between man and his God. Here just one item, the *maṭaṇ-mā* will be looked into. An obvious reference is found in the production of Tirumaṅkayālvār, where two poems bear the heading *Tirumaṭal*. One, the *Ciṛiyamaṭal* has 77 distichs and the other, the *Periya Tirumaṭal* has 148. According to Krishnaveniyammaiyar's presentation of Tirumaṅkaiyar he was so obsessed by love for Kaṇṇan (Krishna) that he wanted immediately without any delay come into him and enjoy full happiness, but the Lord wanted him to remain for some time more in this world and therefore did not let him reach his desire's aim. Enraged Tirumaṅkai says he will destroy all the places where the Lord has manifested himself. In the *Periya Tirumaṭal* he states that this Lord who has done so many wonders and has all the divine qualities and has become manifest in the holy places will be scolded by the poet, as *Koṭiyaṇ*, *Kaṭiyaṇ* and *Narpanarṛavaṇ*, that is as cruel, hardhearted and deprived of all good qualities². Challenging public reaction is also practised by another ālvār, perhaps the foremost poet among them, Nammālvār.

In Bhakti movement the Lord is conceived as male and the soul as female. The emotional realisation of this leads occasionally a Bhakta to try adopting the nature and behaviour of a woman in order to experience the fullest implication of divine love. Maṅkaiyālvār in his *Periya Tirumaṭal* expresses his feelings and reaction as coming out of a woman's nature born in him, and accordingly his *maṭal* takes the form of scolding and abusing the Lord. In so doing he turns to the ways of Northern India, he says, *vaṭanerīye vēṇṭiṇōm*³. This he does in opposition to Tamil tradition which declares the *maṭal* unfit for women. Nammālvār has in his *Tiruviruttam* equalized the longing of the soul for union with the Lord to the love of a maid for a man. The individual soul, the *jivātma* is thought of as a woman and the *paramātma* as a man.

Adopting *maṭal* as a means for reaching full union with the Deity *Āṇṭāl* opens the question: How can this method suit a woman? An interpretation through erotic psychology does perhaps lead to the symbolism of the witches' broomstickride in a different and far too wide cultural complex, but in Tamil tradition women use other means. It is a question of provoking the Deity by feigned dislike or apparent negligence.

The *maṭal* of *Āṇṭāl*, says Krishnaveniyammaiyar, is not like the *maṭal* of other ālvār who have become immersed in Bhakti to the Lord. Theirs is only causing pain to the body, but the *maṭal* of *Āṇṭāl* is involving the soul or « stinging to the quick », *marmaparici*, and thus it has an effect of causing fear to the friends, trembling to the wise, bewil-

2. KIRUṢṆAVENIYAMMAIYAR, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-3.

3. NĀLĀYIRA TIVYAPRAPANTAM, Madras, 1929, p. 635, distich 40.

derment to those who forget the name of the Lord and do not worship him, and ruin to the life-pulse of the Vaishnava Siddhanta ». Thus it was a more cruel, outrageous *maṭal* than that of others ⁴.

Āṇṭāl's relationship with Kaṇṇaṇ is that of love with total union as the goal of her desire. From her childhood onwards this desire is the power guiding her behaviour. The flowers her father, Periyālvār had plucked for the Deity in the temple Āṇṭāl took away and adorned herself with them. This was an outrageous act to the father but he was told in a dream that the god was pleased. For Āṇṭāl it meant an identification with the Lord's company. She experienced a handicap in not being born among the *āyar maṅkaiyar*, the women of the herdsmen, playing with Krishna and envied the maids who woke him up in the month of *mārkaḷi*. She finds a way, however, into the experience of their happiness through a doll, *pāvai*, and lives up to the original story in her poem *Tirupāvai* ⁵. One possible interpretation of the final words in the verses of *Tirupāvai*, the often untranslated address *ēlōrempāvai*, is that the devoted lady herself on purpose shows indifference to the call to wake up and play and sing for the Lord, in other words an act of *maṭal*.

Krishnaveniyammaiyar says that *maṭal* has a point in its favour as Sadhana in Bhakti in being brought about by the mutual love and not by any outsider. Intensive love and nothing else forces the loving partner to do outrageous things. As a woman Āṇṭāl can cause reproach and slander from her surrounding through such acts as are indicated in her longer poem *Nācciyār Tirumoḷi*, I:8 that is appearing in dirty clothes, shaggy hair, having white lips and eating only once. Krishnaveniyammaiyar explains the behaviour of Āṇṭāl by likening her to the householder of a king who was left to beg her food — Āṇṭāl wanted complete union and was not satisfied with « crumbs ». As this was a shame to the king he had to take action — as a result of the *maṭal ūrtal*.

In the book referred to the answer to a question what acts of Āṇṭāl can be considered as *maṭal* is as follows: Doing penance, falling to the feet of Aṇaṅkaṇ/Maṇmataṇ, the Cupid, building toyhouses of sand by little girls, *cirrililaittal*, drawing loops on sand, *kūṭal ilaittal*, which is done by love-lorn ladies for « divining the safe arrival of their lords » ⁶.

Falling to the feet of Aṇaṅkaṇ, the god of love for help to gain the full access to Kaṇṇaṇ is outrageous to him and makes him really angry. Nor is the drawing of loops pleasing to him. They are coercive methods in a way and the Lord destroys what the young girls have built up, but his anger turns out to be a point in their favour. He will have to repent his bad temper. When Āṇṭāl makes her eyes rolling and neglects her body the Lord is said to be impressed by such signs of desperate love, and Āṇṭāl is successful in gaining the Lord for herself.

4. KIRUṢṢAVĒNIYAMMAIYAR, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

5. KIRUṢṢAVĒNIYAMMAIYAR, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

6. *Tamil Lexicon*, Madras, 1924-34, sub *kūṭal*.

The point is that she is making the Lord come to her and not vice versa according to the rules of Bhakti, according to which the devotee reaches the presence of the Lord through his own efforts. This is termed *svakata svikāram* but what Āṇṭāl is aiming at through *maṭal* is *parakata svikāram*⁷.

Thereby the Lord himself is coming to accept her.

From the heading given to the 14 *tirumōḷi* acts of *maṭal* can be inferred. The reference is to *Nālāyira Tivyaprapantam*⁸. The contents of the first *tirumōḷi* is indicated as « Worship of Kāmaṇ (the Cupid to make Kaṇṇaṇ agree ». In the second young women ask Māyaṇ (the One with dark complexion, Vishnu) not to destroy the small house, *cirril*, of theirs. Number ten speaks of changing the Lord's way of acting and contains reproachful remarks about what can be done, Coming after tales of Krishna's play with the maids it leads on to a declaration about Raṅkanāṭaṇ, the Lord of Srirangam that « if the word is a lie that those who approach him he will approach, who will confirm that! ». It ends up with a bold statement that « you will bring her (Āṇṭāl) to the place where Vishnu is with his Lakshmi, Cīṭaraṇiruntūḷi.

Although the word *maṭal* is used with a meaning different from its original implication the justification for the term as Sadhana in Bhakti is clear. The human soul in a devotional experience has reached a state of union with the Deity comparable to and expressed in terms of sexual union, *kūṭal*. A separation has taken place due to indifference on the side of one partner, real or feigned or due to social restrictions, family consideration, rules of tradition etc. The *maṭal* has a double aim, to overcome indifference and silence outside criticism. They both fit in with the outrageous acts of Āṇṭāl to bring about a complete union with Kaṇṇaṇ or the Deity, which according to sacred tradition was achieved when she was absorbed into union with Raṅkanāṭaṇ, the Lord Vishnu of Srirangam. Even if her actions have little to do with the traditional acts of *maṭal ūrtal* their purpose justify the use of the term. A social affront she offered already as a small child to her father when she applied the garlands offered to the Deity to herself. Severe *nōṇpu*, not to please the Deity but to enrage him, won success in the end and accounts for her being worshipped afterwards as a Deity herself, not only at Srivilliputtur but at other places also The high born maid disgraced herself with the company of low-caste herds women in her imaginative and intense Bhakti to reach the summit⁹. Her *maṭal* was successful.

7. KIRUṢṢAVĒṆIYAMMAIYAR, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

8. NĀLĀYIRATIVYAPRAPANTAM, pp. 145-70.

9. KIRUṢṢAVĒṆIYAMMAIYAR, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

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